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ABSTRACT

This article discusses language simplification as one aspect of a person's speech activity, and relates simplification to second language learning. Translation from language to language and translation within one language are processes through which a person, as decoder, decontextualizes a message form-sequence through perception of its distinctive features, then, as re-encoder, accesses stored language forms to recontextualize it, having in mind a specific decoder or group of decoders. Second language instructors need to be aware of the contextualization of their explanations and teaching, having in mind the proficiency level of their students. Vocabulary control is likely to be more effective as a teaching strategy than mere simplification. (MDM)

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SIMPLIFICATION

H V George

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SIMPLIFICATION

H V George

Consider "simplification" as one instance of a person's speech activity: one expects it then to fulfil the functions of, and be both open to the freedoms and subject to the constraints of speech activity generally.

Speech activity comprises "inner" (quantitatively the more important) and "externalized" (spoken or written) forms.

Leaving aside activity below and at the "stream of consciousness" levels, one notes large amounts of activity never meant for externalization, much of it exploratory, meant to get its own feedback (some of it earning the name of 'thinking').

When some of this activity is externalized, the externalization itself may still have a tentative, exploratory function: people "talk to themselves" and "scribble things down", not to communicate with others but "to sort things out".

Such inner speech activity underlies speech directed to others; in the externalization of which getting feedback information from those others is, also and necessarily, a consideration.

My point is, that calling a speech activity "simplification" does not sever it from its inner speech source or from its context of general speech activity.

Whenever inner speech is directed to communication, the two functions of language operate; they are:

1. making communication among members of a group easy.

2. making communication across group borders difficult.

Since either function is both biological and social, it is not strange that simplification sometimes performs the second, or, still more credibly, may be thought by some observers so to do.

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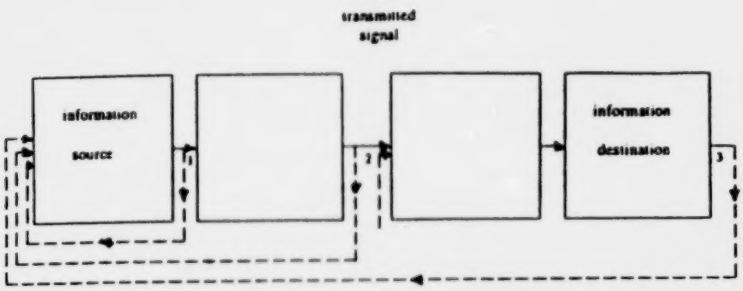
Communication involves (using the words of Shannon and Weaver, 1949) an "information source" and an "information destination" and consequent direction of a "message". Information may be taken to mean 'thoughts and feelings', source and destination to refer to human 'brains', and message to represent the 'encoded information'.

Considering the externalizing process at the information source, the "directing" of the message may be shown as a feedback loop, Feedback 1 below:



A second feedback loop goes from the transmitted signal (speakers and writers hear or see the forms they externalize) to the information source; it may be called "monitoring". And a (less trustworthy) feedback loop goes from the information destination to the information source.

The first feedback loop may credibly be called message "editing", the word editing implying that the externalized message forms were s e l e c t e d from among forms accessible to an encoder. Third parties may judge them to have been selected to be simple or to be complex, according to observer criteria; the message editor, however, has chosen the "most suitable accessible" forms, having in mind his wishes with respect to the message and its destination.

Of course, often the edited message originates in a previously externalized message, in which case I see the situation as like that facing a translator or interpreter, whose professional work it is to operate upon an information input to produce a directed, altered information output.

A consecutive interpreter's main task is to decode an original spoken text (in one language) and register it through a note-taking system representing the substance and logic (but not the morphology, and other redundancy) of the original. Indeed, actual consecutive interpreters' notes give clues to the nature of the inner speech underlying both the original and its subsequent externalizing in the forms of the second language. May I add incidentally, that how non-professional observers might characterize the notes is irrelevant to their function.

Translation theorist Oksaar (1978) draws attention to "contacts among subcodes" within a language, to infer that a monolingual is "a multilingual within a mother tongue". Singapore English speakers must find this statement obvious.

Other professional translators support the view. Enkvist (1978) refers to a common inner speech source (and to its nature) when he writes of "predications.. extracted out of a semantic network" comprising "atomic meanings not yet dressed up.. through lexicalization and syntax".

To summarize so far: translation from language to language and translation within one language are processes through which a person, as decoder, decontextualizes a message form-sequence through perception of its distinctive features, then, as re-encoder, accesses stored language forms (and accessory information) to recontextualize it, having in mind a specific decoder or group of decoders.

I assume no major procedural difference between every person's translating along the cline of editing from internal speech forms to those of externalized speech, every "multilingual monolingual" person's everyday translating from forms at one editing level to forms at another, a Singaporean's choice of "lect" and orthodox language-language translation.

Thus, though the words "simplification" and "simplified" give an idea of 'something done externally to a message', the "simplified" version is realistically described as alternative encoding of it, with the encoder of the alternative version doing the same things as the original encoder: exploring accessible forms, selecting, trying out, and editing; ostensibly directing effort to reduce the communication-hindering and enhance the communication-facilitating aspect of his message encoding.

In which effort, however, the encoder cannot be successful to a greater extent than the performance of the normal functions of language (including the functions of communication-inhibiting) permits.

I have laboured the point, but it is a general one. Certain linguists are fond of attributing to third person "processes" what, in fact, are first person comparisons made from an unstated viewpoint: externalized forms (even those of infant speech) are described as "reduced", "abbreviated", "truncated", "shortened", "over (!)-generalized", "over-elaborated". More transparent are "non-native-like", "non-authentic", with the "model" comparison forms now openly assumed. The conservative negativism of the terminology and underlying attitude should not have entered discussion of simplification through, largely irrelevant, observer comparison of "original" and "simplified" versions.

Seen as directed editing of forms for persons who know only some of the forms an original encoder or a translator of the original encoder could have used, the "directing" aspect may be termed "pedagogic", and the "directed", formal aspect "linguistic"; but I do not know that the distinction is useful. As I see it, "pedagogic" describes a particular encoder-decoder relation, certainly one that influences the editing, but not in a manner differing from that of any other encoder-decoder relation; while the editing is necessarily the editing of forms. What I am trying to stress is the inescapable normality within the editing process of the particular process called "simplification".

However, normality does not mean that the skill of successful editing (of any kind) can be taken for granted.

I now describe a witnessed classroom occurrence. A teacher had to deal with a text sentence: His family became an obstacle in his path to enlightenment. "You know obstacle? No? Obstacle is.. hindrance.. (no class reaction..), is barrier, no? (frustrated).. obstruction.. impediment.. (has done his best; gives up) Let's go on."

The unsophisticated teacher's vocabulary is extensive, and his associational "catenation" or "sequencing" of near synonyms follows, one guesses, the order of his own acquisition of the words. Assuming that the message had some consequence, the learners needed editing to be in the reverse direction, that which a trained, or more experienced, teacher would take. A colleague who had a "defining vocabulary" as an element in a "little language", habitually used, would think of something in his way something which stopped him going where he wanted to go. And she would gesture the 'stopping'.

I should stress that both colleagues decontextualize text, explore stored vocabulary fields, edit and recontextualize messages directed to information destinations. They use a common resource, to the extent they share accessible vocabulary. The second teacher adds a professional resource.

However, the illustrated "defining" or "simplifying" function too is traditionally seen in the more general context of learner experience. It is probable that the efficiency-seeking learner brains of students in either class would "forget" the word obstacle. However, whereas the time and attention of the students in the first class were squandered on further unintelligible forms, the students in the second experienced the gratification of repeated opportunity to access forms already learned.

Thus, it is a minor consideration whether "simplification results in easier learning"; or even in "easier comprehension". These would be small gains compared with the sustained positive effect of a teacher's ability to give learners indefinitely repeated access to a known set of forms.

Nor, as I understand, were pioneers of the "Simplified" or (West's name) "Plateau" Readers in doubt about this, their main pedagogic intent. The merit was in the vocabulary control itself, not directly in the simplification thereby entailed.

Technically, the control provides learners with a favourable "density index", (the index showing the relative "crowding" of the different words within the total number of words). A typical Plateau Reader provided an index of 1 : 20, by comparison with the 1 : 6 of uncontrolled text. The number of words making a single appearance in the text (about h a l f of the different words in an uncontrolled text) is correspondingly reduced, and the whole nature of learner experience altered. It is through these shifts that the Plateau Readers were meant, from the language viewpoint, to engage students in a reward, not a learning, experience.

Density index shifts are also a normal feature of the presence of any simple field existing within a more complex one. I would like to suggest that the small field is usually autonomous.

Salling (1952) said that an infant's (observed) 20-word vocabulary is misinterpreted as a "stage on the way to" an eventual vocabulary. It is, he said, a complete vocabulary representing the total infant perception of those of its needs expressible in words. If one represents the vocabulary as a circle, each word stands for one of the segments; repeated access to which must be a factor in the infant's "shaping" and establishment of the forms. When an infant becomes aware of a

distinction within a segment, and of the existence of words to represent the now distinct concepts, the vocabulary expands, so to say, from internal resources.

The "little language" idea has other expressions: through word frequency counts: with Basic English, through an analytical procedure; with "minimum-difficulty pronouncing vocabularies", through language-language comparison. From various standpoints, all are learner centred, seeking to give (a) maximum return for minimum learner effort (b) speedy learner autonomy. These are little language priorities; in which respect it is idle to use the word "restricted" or "restricting", or "inadequate" or "non-authentic" - the words betray their author's conscious or sub-conscious presumption to status and the habit of making status-derived comparisons.

However, virtually every topic in current ELT is beset by the vocabulary, and politics, of a native speaker status mystique; and professionalism, e.g. that of vocabulary control, and the mystique are often at odds.

The proper domain of the mystique is that of native English speaking countries, preoccupied (a) with inducting immigrants and (b) with their new "industry" of selling "English" to overseas students. For both activities, large numbers of sudden experts are needed. Thus the renewal, in those countries, of the 1890s doctrines of the intrinsic virtue of native speaker teachers to provide a "natural way" to learning, and the intrinsic capacity of learners to "pick up" the language from "authentic" experience.

The rest of the world still needs a degree of professionalism. Professionals are aware of learner "thresholds", of perception, attention, registration, establishment, and autonomy of use; aware too, of the fact that, to cross them, most learners need the sustained experience which, as professionals, they organize. Skill in use of a "little language" that includes a defining vocabulary, is, I would say, a critical factor in learner autonomy.

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